

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 554

IR 012 703

AUTHOR Brochet, Madge Grant, Ed.
TITLE Effective Moderation of Computer Conferences: Notes and Suggestions.
PUB DATE Jun 86
NOTE 19p.; This material is part of the proceedings of the Ontario Universities Computing Conference (17th, Guelph, Canada, June 1986).
PUB TYPE Guides - General (050) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conferences; Guidelines; Participant Characteristics; *Participation; Program Effectiveness; *Teleconferencing
IDENTIFIERS Agendas; *Conference Moderators

ABSTRACT

The role of the computer conference moderator and suggestions for effective conference moderation are presented in this paper, which covers the following points: (1) opening statement; (2) agenda and topics to be discussed; (3) invitations to participants; (4) conference duration; (5) hands-on training for participants; (6) selection of participants; (7) necessary number of participants; (8) equipment availability; (9) network connections; (10) definition of "success" in a particular conference; (11) steering the conference; (12) stimulating discussion; (13) adding new topics to the agenda; (14) group decision making; (15) copyright; (16) financial constraints; (17) keeping on target; (18) troubleshooting; (19) comfort levels; and (20) managing censorship. These topics are divided into four loosely defined categories which reflect the life cycle of a conference--beginnings, introductory stages, the mature conference, and wrap-up. Roles identified for the moderator include organizer, goal-setter, discriminator of useful or useless ideas, host, pace setter, explainer, and entertainer. (MES)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

Effective Moderation of Computer Conferences

Notes and Suggestions

Edited by

Madge Grant Brochet

Computing Support Services
University of Guelph
Guelph, Canada

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Madge Brochet

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The ideas and suggestions contained in this article were developed, at the suggestion of the editor, M. Brochet, via a computer conference which ran in the University of Guelph's CoSy system for a period of eight weeks during the spring/summer of 1985. Approximately 35 people were invited to participate in the conference by the editor, who served as moderator of the conference. The majority of the participants were located in Guelph; several members of the conference, however, participated from European sites, and the contents of the conference were shared with another conference dealing with the same topic on the COM system in Sweden.

INTRODUCTION

The choice of computer conferencing as a method of sharing ideas on this particular topic permitted the editor to incorporate suggestions from a wide

ED282554

IR012703

variety of conference participants, during a relatively brief period of time. Electronic conferencing also provided the editor and the participants with an on-line case study; some of the problems under discussion emerged as real concerns for this conference as it evolved.

INITIAL REACTIONS TO USING COMPUTER CONFERENCING

One of the first reactions many people have to the discovery of a well designed and easy-to-use computer conferencing system is a sense of relief. Encountering a manual easier to read than the Dead Sea Scrolls, coupled with commands that make sense and get the job done is a rare pleasure. We can see immediately how the system can make communication easier for us. We tend to overdose at first, joining conferences and reading messages, until we settle down, the initial novelty worn off, and begin to develop our own personal conferencing style.

Initial contact with computer conferencing is very often non-structured and informal, with new participants browsing through whatever open conferences are available, meeting people and exchanging ideas. As we become more involved in conferencing, however, we start to realize that some conferences possess an energy that encourages active participation, while others, apparently designed to facilitate discussion of equally relevant and interesting topics, seem to spit and sputter, with minor flurries of activity and little of value to offer to the participant. We begin to see that conferencing is a vulnerable communications medium, for all its speed and technological brilliance. This may seem too obvious to state, but the success of computer conferencing is based on how

willing we are to share ideas, and to participate actively. As we begin to incorporate computer conferencing into our day-to-day communication patterns, we have to look at how we can best function in this medium. We develop a conferencing style, and although I hesitate to use the word "rules", we do begin to think about how to make our conferencing successful; we look at the components of computer conferencing, much the same way as we looked at using the telephone and adapted to picking up auditory cues to avoid always speaking at the same time as the person on the other end of the line.

THE ROLE OF THE CONFERENCE MODERATOR

Since computer conferencing is such a new and potentially valuable communications tool, it is easy to assume that all that has to be done to get an interesting conference under way is to announce the topic and invite the participants. Although some conferences have taken off in this fashion, and have proved interesting and dynamic, it is more common to see such conferences run into problems, regardless of the pertinence of the topic.

Examining the role of the conference moderator can help here, as we attempt to organize our conferences in an effective manner. The moderator initiates the conference, chooses the participants, and obviously stays with it from start to finish, thus providing us with a point of reference, from which we can examine many of the ingredients in effective conferencing. Some of these components will not be directly under the control of the moderator, but can be identified as points for both moderator and participants to keep in mind.

4

The suggestions regarding effective conference moderation that were collected via the CoSy conference at the University of Guelph have been divided into four loosely defined categories which reflect the life cycle of a conference:

Successful Beginnings

Nurturing the Introductory Stages

Maintaining the Mature Conference and

Wrapping Up the Conference.

Many of the comments relate to more than one category, and are more or less relevant depending on the individual conferencing situation. Keep in mind that conferences are going to differ, not only in terms of topics discussed, but in terms of:

- whether the conference is "open" (anyone using the conferencing system can join at will), or "closed" (the moderator invites the participants to join the conference).

- whether participation is voluntary or mandatory - with mandatory participation, for example, a supervisor may replace weekly staff meetings with a computer conference, as opposed to a conference where members are invited to share ideas at will.

- whether the objectives of the conference are specific to the work of a particular working group or committee (task related), or whether the objectives of the conference are more content related, with a view to sharing ideas on one topic or a variety of topics.

It is impossible to tie each suggestion to one particular set of criteria, but instances are noted in the text where a particular idea ties in closely with a specific conferencing environment. The important thing to remember is that a flexible approach to moderation is a key element in the creation of an energetic conferencing environment.

SUCCESSFUL BEGINNINGS

OPENING STATEMENTS, AGENDA, INVITATIONS

In all conferences, the moderator should provide a clear statement of the purpose of the conference in the opening message.

An agenda and topics to be discussed should appear in the opening message from the moderator, and he/she should make clear that anyone not interested in participating can resign without feeling ill at ease. This is especially true when participation is voluntary - particularly when the moderator has included the participant without prior discussion.

A moderator should extend a personal invitation to potential contributors to the conference, issued via a private "mail" message. It can become annoying to people to find that they have been added to more conferences than they have time for.

Careful consideration should be given to the selection of the topics to be discussed, particularly in situations where much of the discussion may tend to wander.

It can be helpful to set agenda and topics with some of the participants PRIOR to the beginning of the conference. The moderator should decide if a conference can be set up without prior face-to-face consultation with potential participants, or if it would profit from prior arrangements. A fast set-up works best when the conference is straightforward and on a specific topic.

It should also be recognized that the term "computer conferencing" is being used for a wide variety of tasks, from joke sharing to joint authoring, to committee meetings. Some conferences are set up to expedite an on-going conversation among members of a committee. This diversity of applications requires a flexibility on the part of moderators - so that the differing needs of individual conferences can be met.

CONFERENCE DURATION

The moderator should determine the duration of the conference and notify the participants. This allows people to schedule their conferencing time.

START-UP TRAINING

Participants should be provided with adequate hands-on training before the conference starts, and again, after a week or so of operation, to answer questions and clear up problems. This is important when users are new to computers and the lifespan of the conference is limited and/or participation is mandatory.

The moderator should be aware that local conferences will be different from international ones, with the international ones somewhat more complicated to organize.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

A conference will benefit greatly from the selection of appropriate members by the moderator so that common interests motivate discussion. Above all, it will be a COMMON NEED, and common interests that motivate conference members to participate freely.

When deciding whether a conference should be "open" or "closed", it should be kept in mind that each of these types of conferences has its positive and negative points.

CRITICAL MASS

Finally, a conference should have sufficient numbers to provide a CRITICAL MASS. This is less relevant when a conference is designed around a committee or work team, but is most important where you are inviting a specific group to participate. Opinions differ as to exactly how many people are necessary for a conference to have a critical mass, but small groups (10-15) seem to be less active.

NUTURING THE EARLY STAGES

EQUIPMENT AVAILABILITY

At the local level, hardware and software must be readily available, together with adequate training and documentation. Conferences will not get off the ground if there is a lack of equipment that can be easily accessed.

GOOD NETWORKS

In addition, at the international level, there has to be good network connections.

DEFINING SUCCESS

The moderator should consider how he/she defines "success" in a particular conference; i.e. quantity of messages, number of new ideas, agreement among all participants. For example, a professor introducing students to computer conferencing as part of a course may be looking for a specific number of messages in the system over a defined period of time. A committee, on the other hand, may be looking for consensus on an issue, while saving on travel costs. Success will be determined quite differently in each of these two conferences.

STEERING THE CONFERENCE

Just as the effective chairperson channels the progress of a meeting, the moderator must steer (not drive) the conference.

STIMULATING DISCUSSION / GROUP EXPECTATIONS

A moderator with the ability to stimulate discussion will bring the conference effectively through the initial stages. She/he should take pains to see that all members of a conference are participating. Potential "hang-ups" should be considered, i.e. keyboard phobias, problems regarding correct spelling and grammar. If moderators are to encourage participation, they need to make clear how important it is that conference members share ideas, and to indicate that format, spelling, style and grammar are (in most cases) not all that critical. People can react more openly when group expectations are outlined clearly.

NEW TOPICS

A very relevant part of the moderator's role is to be aware of new topics arising within the conference. The moderator should determine when it is appropriate to identify the new topic as part of the agenda.

There is a fine line between sub-dividing a conference to the point where members are jumping from one topic to another, not sure where to make a comment, and the situation where many very different ideas are being discussed under the banner of the opening topic.

LATE STARTS

A poor or late start can seriously affect the willingness of a member to participate, so the moderator should ensure that all participants are registered

in the conference, and that participants are not experiencing technical difficulties.

GROUP DECISION MAKING

It is important for a moderator to give some thought to how decision making will be handled by the conference members. For example, if an invitation comes in to share the contents of a conference with another conference, how will the moderator and members come to a decision? Voting is a possibility, but difficult to implement. The moderator should, however, carefully seek out the opinion of the group.

One possible way to do this is to tell the group about the item up for decision and ask for comments, stating that if no serious objections are raised by a certain date that the moderator will implement a specific decision.

CENSORSHIP AND COPYRIGHT

If messages are to be moved between conferences, the questions of censorship and copyright may well arise. If ground rules are decided upon at the beginning of the conference, it will be a lot easier for the moderator to withdraw an inappropriate message than if the author thinks that complete freedom is the order of the day. Any censorship should always be explained to the participants, and the matter taken up privately between the moderator and the contributor.

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Finally, at the international level, financial reasons may be a reason for non-

participation in a conference. A moderator may try to discover if this is the case with a particular group member.

MAINTAINING THE MATURE CONFERENCE

MODERATOR ROLES

It is important to realize that a conference moderator must work at different levels. She/he is:

an organizer: and should aim at developing the best technical solutions, to ensure the success of the conference. There should be a willingness to try out new ideas.

a goal-setter: make plans, but be able to determine the point at which changing those plans might be of value.

a "discriminator": try, as moderator, to make complex matters simple and differentiate between useful and useless ideas. This is relevant as a conference acquires an "identity" and "style". It is very noticeable that as people become more comfortable with the medium that there is a tendency for comments to become more wordy and elaborate.

a host: the moderator should work to create the feeling of trust so that people feel free to contribute with exposure to undue criticism. This is less relevant where the discussion is intentionally defined as "no holds barred".

a pace setter: he/she should attempt to remove communications barriers and promote cooperation. An awareness of the dynamics of how the group is working is more helpful in this respect; the moderator should keep in touch with the "pulse" of the conference, with an ability to function as

an explainer: increasing communication by relaying overlooked messages, raising questions that have remained unanswered.

In addition, the moderator is:

an entertainer: the moderator should be able to evaluate the mood of the conference and ensure that participants are relaxed.

KEEPING ON TARGET

The moderator should be able to re-direct the conference when it goes off topic. Limits should be suggested when it becomes obvious that one or a few members of the conference are moving the conference away from its defined objectives.

This is a difficult role for the moderator, as few of us want to act as disciplinarian, or reduce the comfort level of the group. Usually, however, overbearing group members will have done a lot of damage to the structure of the conference by the time the moderator is forced to act, and intervention may be the only way to salvage the conference.

TROUBLE-SHOOTING

Many conferences will develop successfully and almost run themselves. However if a conference stalls, the moderator should be prepared to trouble shoot and attempt to remedy the problem. Technical problems regarding equipment, however, are infinitely easier to solve than those involving personality clashes.

COMFORT LEVELS

Reasonably equitable participation is often a concern in developing a mature conference. Some people are not as comfortable using new tools as others; the moderator should attempt to humanize the technology as much as possible.

If the moderator hears nothing from a participant, it is easy to assume that the person is not interested in that conference. The moderator should take the time to check; it may well be that a technical glitch has left the person unaware that you hope he/she will participate.

MANAGING CENSORSHIP

Freedom of speech versus censorship is a question that can arise suddenly in an otherwise mature conference, and can present problems, particularly if censorship has not been previously discussed, and members are shocked to see that the moderator has taken on the "power" to wipe out a participant's contribution.

The conference will move more smoothly if this issue is raised up front, in the introductory stages of a conference, so that participants know what to expect.

Another related point here is whether the moderator has any responsibility to the author, to paraphrase a deleted message and explain why it was removed.

The reasons behind censorship are also point for consideration. Is a moderator to withdraw messages because they are too wordy or off-topic, or only in instances where some serious concern is felt that the content of the message is completely inappropriate to the conference?

This issue may emerge in an early stage of a conference, or may only become a concern when a conference has been under way for some time. It is best, however, if members know how this will be dealt with from the outset.

WRAPPING UP THE CONFERENCE

There comes a point when a subject has been beaten to death and beyond. If the topic is not an essential part of someone's work, the participant may not be willing to devote further time. With this in mind, it may be an excellent idea to limit the active life of a conference, so that participants don't feel obliged to keep a conference alive that has become moribund.

At the closing of a conference, the moderator should thank participants for their contributions; if any type of wrap-up or response is expected from the moderator, he/she should carry through with the arrangements.

It is helpful if members are reminded that the conference is about to be ended. Often there will be a flurry of activity at the end of the conference.

The closing of the conference should happen in two stages. After the moderator has notified participants that the conference is about to close, he/she should make it into a "read-only" conference. This allows participants access to the conference to extract whatever information they require, without adding any new comments. Then, after a suitable period of time, the moderator can have the conference "purged" from the system.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

BEHAVIOR PATTERNS

A moderator should be aware that behavior patterns can change in conferencing.

Someone who is quiet in a face-to-face situation may turn out to have a great deal to say in a conference.

In addition, there will be times when tempers flare, perhaps more often than in a meeting, where immediate feedback from facial expressions and body language can reflect increasing tensions and cause more aggressive participants to back off.

The fact that one is alone at a screen typing in a message often misleads us into thinking that no one is going to read what we type.

It might therefore be a good idea, when dealing with a group that is committed to working together (i.e. a committee or a task force), for the moderator to choose to operate with a blend of computer conferences and face-to-face meetings.

And finally, a moderator needs a very good sense of humour and some patience!

CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

By

Madge Grant Brochet

It is clear that computer conferencing is already at a stage where many people are able to see its value and incorporate it into their working environment with a minimum of problems. Certain aspects of conferencing can be improved, however; the following suggestions address the topic of conferencing as a whole.

- a) Well organized introductory materials should be provided to potential conference members. Materials should include "how-to" information on connecting to the system from a variety of locations. Easy-to-use reference cards are helpful.

In situations where students are obliged to start using conferencing as part of course requirements, it is helpful to provide novice users with a hands-on session where everyone can start to use the system at the same time. This encourages those who are anxious about using a computer system.

- b) Access to machines must be considered, regardless of whether participation is voluntary or mandatory. There is general agreement that easy access to equipment is top of the list in encouraging active participation in conferencing.

- c) The role of the moderator must be given particular consideration. It may be helpful for the moderator to discuss, face-to-face, with a group how he/she sees the role of moderator, to clarify expectations and to reach consensus on controversial points, such as censorship.

- d) The role of participants in a conference should also be examined, at the beginning of the conference, and if possible in a face-to-face meeting. Questions about message length and what types of topics are appropriate can be aired. The group can develop guidelines for themselves, rather than feeling that "rules" have been imposed on them.

Acknowledgements

This material was published in the Proceedings of the 17th Ontario Universities Computing Conference (June 1986), and appears here by permission of York University.

I would like to express my thanks to the members of the MODGUIDE conference at the University of Guelph CoSy who generously shared their time and ideas on effective conference moderation, in particular, Dr. Robert Harper of the University of Helsinki.

Madge Grant Brochet
 Computing Support Services
 University of Guelph
 June 1986